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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of the freshman composition "reader" as a source of prose models for student essays is questionable because their often long and complicated rhetorical strategies and ideas can intimidate the writers. The narrow expository patterns offered in the readers can also reduce essay writing to a matter of copying a prescribed organizational pattern, drawing attention away from consideration of persona, audience, and purpose, thus restricting the student's inventiveness. The greatest drawback of such models is their fundamental inability to illustrate the process of writing. Unfortunately, the writing process probably cannot be demonstrated fully and effectively in any form except the actual practice of writing. Despite these drawbacks, freshmen readers can be productive in the composition course. Students can keep journals of their responses to the passages as a prewriting technique. The instructor can then gradually steer the journal writing away from expressive and toward referential prose, including abstracts of essays and discussions or refutations of a passage's main point. The readers can still be used for direct imitation, but this should be introduced much later in the course, in conjunction with a discussion on style, and only after the less restrictive use of prose models has been explored in some detail. (HTH)

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Readers in the Composition Course: Why They Fail, How We Can Make Them Work

No branch of the English textbook industry is more prolific today than the branch which produces freshman readers. Indeed, if you are like me, every time you reach in your mailbox, you pull out the latest offering, doubtlessly a book with a title that sounds about like the title of the book you pulled out the day before. One major publisher currently has a program to introduce three new readers into the market each year for the next several years. Clearly, the market is a lucrative one; while handbooks come and go and rhetorics have their day in the sun, the readers live on--standard baggage of the composition course. And writing teachers are apparently willing to try new readers as fast as editors can edit them and publishers can get them into print.

What bothers me about all this is not our eagerness to try new readers, for our doing so suggests a certain vitality, a healthy effort to experiment and freshen course material. Nor do I quarrel with the selections found in most readers today; by and large there is an abundance of fine material, provocative and varied enough to appeal to every taste, contempo-

rary to classical. I do have some reservations, however, about the way we use readers, for I suspect we rarely stop to consider exactly how they fit into the writing course. Over the past five years, most of us here have probably given considerable thought to the way we teach writing, and I suspect that many of us have altered our methods, probably moving closer to the process approach than we were before. But I wonder if we have given comparable thought to the way we use readers. How many of us feel satisfied at the end of a term with the use we have made of the reader? And how many of us have managed to make the reader compatible with teaching writing as a process? Indeed, is it even possible to do so?

That, in essence, is the question I wish to explore today. Can readers be used productively in a composition course that treats writing as a process? I believe they can, and I plan to suggest a way to make readers work, perhaps even make them central, in the writing classroom. But before doing so, I need to take up the issue raised in the first part of my subtitle, to explain why, for me, readers often fail to accomplish what they are supposed to do.

II

Readers are used most frequently as a source of prose models for student essays. Indeed, of the several dozen readers I looked at in preparing this paper, all but a handful insist on modeling as a vital function of the reader; by reading and analyzing

essays, students are supposed to write better essays themselves. I find this the most questionable of the various claims made for readers; although I accept the premise that those who read well and in quantity are likely over the long term to write more effectively, I doubt the kind of direct (and often nearly magical) connections between reading and writing suggested by many textbook editors. One such editor, for example, contends that familiarity with a "few outstanding writers . . . will greatly improve" student writing, and that this improvement will occur partly "by a kind of osmosis."[1] Other claims are somewhat less extravagant, but, as X.J. and Dorothy Kennedy put it in the new Bedford Reader, many editors "wax more loftily abstract the more fervently they urge the student to use examples."[2] Here, for instance, are a few pieces of lofty prose gathered from the prefaces of readers published (or reissued) within the past year:

(1) Good readers will observe not only what is written, but how. And through sensitive attention to such features as choice of words and images, the form of sentences, the shape of paragraphs, and the structure of the writing as a whole, they should then become better able to make the decision to embark on the practice necessary for success in writing.[3]

(2) This book is designed to teach students to write with clarity, vigor, and grace, and to secure their

> commitment to the discipline of writing, not by the prescription of rules, but through the testimony of eloquent prose.[4]
>
> (3) I hope the material in this collection will be a source of pleasure and interest. The ideas and rhetorical skills of these authors will reward their discovery. They should, moreover, be taken as guides and stimuli to one's own writing that shows increasing skill, power and ease.[5]

These statements are surely well-intended, but in their idealism, they overlook the difficulties of using professional models for student writing. Put simply, such models, as generally used, are not practical for the beginner; even the briefest sample essays are often longer and more complicated--both in rhetorical strategies and in ideas--than those the student will actually be writing; and the ultimate, if unintended, effect of such models, is to intimidate the writer. Paul Connolly puts it this way: "If students are required to respond too closely and directly to assigned readings, they will find the essayist's handling of the subject preemtive, leaving them at a loss for words."[6]

And perhaps the most damaging of all ways we can preempt the beginning writer is by using models to teach narrow expository patterns (comparison, causal analysis, classification, etc.). In doing this we not only risk intimidation, but also trap stu-

dents into narrow channels of thinking that preclude invention and discovery. Most readers today are organized by expository modes, and I fear that such readers invite the most slavish sort of imitation, reducing the writing of essays to a matter of copying a prescribed organizational pattern, and drawing attention away from more important rhetorical considerations of persona, audience, and purpose. An essay's organization should grow out of these considerations rather then a predetermined formula imposed on the writer before he even begins to write.

A narrow approach to using models, then, tends to restrict the student's inventiveness and, ultimately, take from him control of his own writing. But I believe there is another, more fundamental drawback to using essays as student models. Such models, by their very nature, cannot fully illustrate the process of writing, cannot show students what goes into the making of an essay; collections of essays must necessarily contain finished products. Of course, we can show students drafts of an essay (as several readers now do with, for example, two versions of a Kennedy speech or the two drafts of the "Declaration of Independence"), but the number of essays that lend themselves to such a treatment is small; and the writing habits of most essayists are too irregular, eccentric and diffuse to allow us to reproduce in print the process by which an essay emerges toward its final shape. A number of textbook editors, acknowledging this fact, have recently made efforts to construct "pro-

cess readers," or have at least suggested ways to look at essays in progress. Elizabeth Penfield, for example, in Purpose and Pattern, asks students to place themselves in the author's shoes and to "see if a piece of writing could benefit from further revision."[6] But Penfield herself admits that, finally, collections of readings "usually show only the finished works, unintentionally implying that like Athena, the essay ... sprang forth, fully formed, from the mind of the creator."[7] Annie Dillard, quoted by Penfield, states the problem pointedly: "I write by hand, draw all over the margins, scratch everything out, draw long arrows, use strange language-- the usual, and all far too complicated for me to recreate in type or for students to follow."[8]

Among the most recent efforts to demonstrate the writing process with prose models is the new Bedford Reader. The editors commissioned eight of the fifty-four pieces in the book, asking professionals to develop essays using a given pattern of exposition. The book's unique feature (which the publisher sees as a major innovation) is a series of "postscripts on process" in which the authors discuss various problems they encountered in writing the commissioned essays.[9] While such an effort is noteworthy and promising, it finally fails short of actually demonstrating the writing process; unfortunately, that process probably cannot be demonstrated fully and effectively in any form except the actual practice of composing.

If, then, as I have suggested, readers generally fail to

provide legitimate models or to demonstrate the writing process, what happens to them in a classroom where writing is taught as a process? I suspect they sometimes end up as mere baggage, used more out of tradition than need (or out of the instructor's sense of guilt for having asked students to buy a fifteen dollar text). Some teachers reduce readers to stimuli for class discussion, often splitting the course into two unrelated components--one about writing and another about "ideas" or "popular culture." The danger here is that the essay collection can become a mere filler between writing assignments, lending little support to the students' writing, which should, after all, be the focus of the course.

III

Having outlined some of the ways readers don't work, I would now like to propose a few practical ways I think they can work, can, in fact, become central in the development and shaping of ideas. Some of these suggestions can be adapted for individual assignments, but they can also be used as a sequence of assignments, and even as a means of organizing an entire course.

What follows, then, is a tentative answer of "yes" to the question I posed early in this paper: Can readers be productive in a composition course that treats writing as a process?[10]

The first and most natural way to generate writing from reading is to solicit subjective reactions to prose passages.

This is essentially a pre-writing technique that can immerse students in the process of writing from the very first class meeting. Variations are probably endless, but I simply ask students to keep a running notebook of their responses, writing at least a page for each assigned reading. I make the responses (at least in the beginning of the term) as unstructured as possible. The responses, which are read aloud in class, discussed, and eventually used to develop essay topics, range from direct comments on the essayist's ideas to straightforward summary to observations of the most tangential sort--perhaps a single word or image triggering a personal recollection or calling forth an issue completely unrelated to the reading material.

This method of subjective response is, of course, a form of directed free writing. And when done over a period of time, the responses become a kind of journal that I find more valuable than the sort of personal journal typically used in the composition course; for one thing, the reading journal is, as a rule, less purely expressive than most journals, and thus more useful in the public forum of the classroom as a source for writing and discussion about writing. To me, however, the greatest advantage of the reading journal is the ongoing writing practice it provides; the regular composing keeps attention focused on the readings and on the generating of ideas for formal essays.

The journal can yield two or more such essays fairly early in the course. These need not be slavishly tied to the readings;

in fact, they can be related in the most indirect way to what the student originally recorded as a subjective response. The collection of essays, then, more than just a source of models which may intimidate the beginning writer, becomes a springboard for ideas that eventually and gradually develop into essays--after much incubation and exploration, and with the help of the instructon and the student's peers.

A second way to use the reader for generating writing is more traditional, nearer to the sort of close reading and analysis often used for prose models in writing courses. As the student's subjective responses develop over a few weeks, the instructor can gradually steer the writing in the journals away from expressive and toward referential prose, asking students to develop abstracts of essays or to discuss the main points developed in one of the essays. The writing gradually becomes more deliberate, more functional and academic.

The writing done in this stage of a course can serve as pre-writing for formal, analytical essays. The responses to the readings become ways of exploring and note taking, means of gaining familiarity with an essay before writing about it. Students can write several kinds of analytic responses, finally settling on one of them as the seed for a formal expository essay. Or they can develop arguments in support of or opposed to a position taken by an essayist in the reader. Here again, though, the student's paper need not be a narrow, direct response to the essay. A persuasive paper that grows indirect-

ly out of the student's analytic responses to an essay or group of essays is likely to be more engaging than a mere refutation or, worse, a repetition of the points made in the "model."

A third and final way of making readings central to the writing course is through direct imitation. This places greater restrictions on the student than either of the earlier formulas, and perhaps it undercuts the aim of teaching writing as a process. But imitation can be particularly useful in heightening a student's awareness of style. I ask students to take a passage and closely imitate (or perhaps parody) its tone, its stylistic features, or one or more of its rhetorical strategies. For some students, the exercise can be genuine fun--especially if they have a knack for parody or take pleasure in working closely with details.

Instructors might find little time for this third kind of assignment during a single term. I'd suggest, in any case, introducing it late in the course, in conjunction with a discussion of style, only after the less restrictive uses of prose models have been explored in some detail. I can think of nothing more deadly than starting a course with such an assignment; but, introduced ar the right time and with the right students, it can have good results.

Notes

1. William Smart, Eight Modern Essayists, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1980), p. vii.
2. X.J. Kennedy and Dorothy M. Kennedy, The Bedford Reader, (New York: St. Martin's, 1982), p. vi.
3. Joyce S. Stuart, Contemporary College Reader, 2nd ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1981), p. xi.
4. Caroline Schrodes, et al., Readings for Rhetoric, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979), p. x.
5. Michael F. Shugrue, The Essay (New York: Macmillan, 1981), p. xii.
6. Paul Connolly, On Essays: A Reader for Writers (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), p. xiv.
7. Elizabeth Penfield, Purpose and Pattern: A Rhetoric Reader (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1982), pp. xxiii-xxiv.
8. Penfield, p. xxiv.
9. Kennedy and Kennedy, pp. 121, 171, 229, 283, 323, 373, 418, 464.
10. The following suggestions are partly my own and partly inspired by a number of sources, including two recent textbooks: Paul Connolly, On Essays: A Reader for Writers (New York: Harper and Row, 1981) and Writing--A College Handbook (New York: Norton, 1982).